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EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER PRACTICES REGARDING THE USE OF DRAMATIC PLAY IN K-2 CLASSROOMS

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Sydney, December 2000

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ABSTRACT

This study explores early childhood teacher practices regarding the use of dramatic play in Kindergarten to Year 2 (K-2) classrooms. Four early childhood teachers working in Kindergarten participated in the study. Two of these teachers rarely used dramatic play. They were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the importance of dramatic play, and the factors which support or discourage its use. The other two teachers, who frequently incorporated dramatic play into their programs, were also interviewed. A particular focus was to explore how they overcame obstacles to the provision of dramatic play. Document analysis and non-participant observations in the classrooms of those teachers who frequently used dramatic play enabled further insight into how time, space and resources can be managed to enable the use of dramatic play in K-2.

INTRODUCTION

In an 'overcrowded curriculum', time to allow children to engage in dramatic play in schools appears to be diminishing (Anning,1994; Dockett & Fleer,1999; Dunn,1996; Elkind,1990). Despite the apparent benefits of dramatic play for children in the early years of school, there is much anecdotal evidence, but little empirical evidence, to suggest that dramatic play rarely exists in K-2 . (Anning, 1994; Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Elkind, 1990; Hall & Abbott, 1991; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1993; Jones & Reynolds, 1995; Klugman, 1990; Michalovitz, 1990; Sapp, 1992; Seefeldt, 1995; Trawick-Smith, 1998). The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to explore early childhood teacher practices regarding the use of dramatic play in K-2 classrooms. More specifically, the study aimed to: (1) determine some of the factors which influence early childhood teachers' decisions regarding whether to include dramatic play in their classrooms; and (2) document early childhood teacher practices when implementing dramatic play in K-2 classrooms.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DRAMATIC PLAY

Much of our understanding of the value of play has originated from Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978), and Bruner (1990), who focused on the role of play in children's development. They saw children as active explorers of their world. With each new encounter or interaction, children are able to discover new meanings, and thus develop more complex understandings and skills. Play is therefore, an important part of the process of constructing knowledge. It enables children to control what happens, and to use what they already know to further their understanding and development.

Dramatic play is one of the most important forms of play (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Sometimes referred to as 'pretend play', 'imaginative play' or 'symbolic play', dramatic play will be referred to here as the process by which "children assume an identity in role

enactment, relating to other persons or objects as if they are other than themselves, or altering time and space in the form of situational transformations" (Johnson, 1998, p.148). This definition is reflected in the NSW English K-6 Syllabus (1994) which refers to dramatic play as "the process by which children represent themselves in imagined situations" (p.196).

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING DRAMATIC PLAY in K-2 CLASSROOMS

Kagan (1990) identified three types of barriers inhibiting the implementation of dramatic play in the early years of school. Attitudinal barriers largely derive from the value teachers place on play. In an academically oriented curriculum, children are expected to attain a certain level of achievement as they progress throughout the school grades (Anning, 1994; Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Elkind, 1990; Jones & Reynolds, 1995; Michalovitz, 1990; Sapp, 1992). As a result, they may only participate in dramatic play after finishing their 'work' or to fill in time. Although early childhood teachers generally understand and value the benefits of dramatic play, in school contexts they may be dissuaded from implementing by different value orientations that other teachers or administrative staff may hold towards play (Bryant et.al.,1991; Hatch & Freeman,1988; Jones & Reynolds,1995; Klugman,1990; Smith & Shepard,1988; Stipek & Byler, 1997). Without staff recognition of the importance of dramatic play or support for its inclusion in the program, early childhood teachers may find it increasingly difficult to justify its place in the classroom.

Structural barriers to implementing dramatic play involve limitations imposed by curricula, such as time, space, and materials (Kagan, 1990). As teachers face growing expectations for more teacher-directed academic instruction, time for children to play is increasingly threatened (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Kagan, 1990; Seefeldt, 1995; Trawick-Smith, 1998). Similarly, the space that teachers require to facilitate dramatic play experiences may be restricted, limiting the opportunity to include materials, such as small furniture or dress-up clothes. While children need physical environments that are well planned and which promote the development of self-control and mastery, creative solutions to problems of time, space and materials may not always be visible to teachers (Kagan, 1990; Marion, 1995).

Functional barriers are closely associated with attitudinal barriers (Kagan, 1990). As children progress through the grades, Principals and administrative staff can often place less importance on play (Klugman, 1990; Monighan-Nourot, 1990; Stone, 1995). Inservice training addressing how play can be utilised in the classroom may be minimal. In their preservice programs, early childhood teachers receive theoretical and practical preparation concerning the use of dramatic play. Each school context, and the challenges of implementing dramatic play in that context, however, differs. Preservice preparation, alone, may not be sufficient to enable teachers to feel confident about implementing in schools (Seefeldt, 1995; Spidell Rusher et.al., 1992).

DRAMATIC PLAY AND THE CURRICULUM

Despite these barriers, dramatic play has received much attention in curricula such as the New South Wales English K-6 Syllabus (NSW Board of Studies, 1994 / 1998). This emphasis is evident in both Early Stage 1 (Kindergarten) and Stages 1-3 (Years 1 & 2), which recommend dramatic play as a tool for facilitating children's spoken language. Other aims throughout Stages 1-3, such as practising spoken language to negotiate, solve problems, and present opinions, also recommend dramatic play as a tool that can assist in accomplishing such goals. Specific examples of how to facilitate dramatic play, however, are limited. By describing how some teachers have applied dramatic play into everyday classroom practice, this study might help to inform the practice of other teachers in K-2.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is informed by interpretivist perspectives that place priority on gaining insight into the meaning that people construct in their everyday situated actions (Bruner,1990; Le Compte & Preissle, 1993), and in this case, an understanding of teachers' decisions and practices regarding dramatic play.

Participants

The participants were four early childhood qualified teachers currently teaching Kindergarten in NSW schools. These teachers were invited to participate because they varied in the extent to which they were incorporating dramatic play into their programs. A brief description of the participants and their teaching contexts follows.

Participant F

F was in her second year of teaching, in an affluent, private, boys' school in Sydney's eastern suburbs. While the school espoused an early childhood philosophy in the early years of school, in the lower primary grades a more traditional approach to learning was encouraged. F had 21 children in her class, predominantly from Anglo-Australian backgrounds. F allocated, but rarely used, a 'free play' time each week.

Participant K

K was in her first year of teaching, in a public school in Sydney's inner-west serving 650 children from Kindergarten to Year 6. K perceived many of the other K-2 teachers had some understanding of a play-based approach. Several had early childhood qualifications. K had 23 children in her class and almost 50% had English as a Second Language (ESL) backgrounds. K scheduled a weekly 'free play' time, that was often replaced with work that had not been completed earlier in the week.

Participant S

S was also in her first year of teaching, in a public school in Sydney's south-west. The school served 768 children from Kindergarten to Year 6, of whom 85% were from ESL backgrounds. Of the four Kindergarten teachers, two had early childhood qualifications. The Principal strongly supported and encouraged the employment of early childhood qualified teachers in the school. S had 24 children in her class, many of these children had not attended pre-school or day-care prior to starting school. S scheduled a dramatic play session twice weekly and had a dramatic play area permanently set up in her classroom.

Participant T

T had over 15 years teaching experience in both pre-school and school settings. In addition to her early childhood teaching qualification, T had postgraduate qualifications in Special Education, and a Masters of Early Childhood Education. T was taking a one year position at a public school in Sydney's northern suburbs. The school served children from Kindergarten to Year 6, with 67% from ESL backgrounds. While some of the families attending the school had been part of the local community for several years, many of the children were from a nearby refuge and their attendance was transient. The school has a close relationship with the Institute of Early Childhood and the Principal and staff were committed to exploring and promoting early childhood education. T scheduled dramatic play daily.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. A semi-structured interview (approximately 45 minutes in duration) was conducted with each teacher. Interviews took place in the teacher's classroom, either after school, or in their release time. Initial questions focused on the context within which each teacher was working, and their perceptions of the importance of dramatic play and of factors that support or discourage the use of dramatic play. S and T, the two teachers who were incorporating considerable dramatic play into their programs, were also asked about the materials they provided for dramatic play, the teacher's role in dramatic play, and the time they allocated for dramatic play. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

In addition, non-participant observation visits were made to S and T's classrooms. These teachers were observed over two to three days. Observations focused on the teacher's teaching style and involvement in dramatic play experiences, planning, programming and evaluation decisions, and the presence / location of dramatic play materials in the classroom environment. Observations were recorded in the form of descriptive field notes, sketches and non-identifying photographs. As the data collection progressed, descriptive field notes were supplemented with reflective field notes. Document collection involved gathering documents such as timetables which showed evidence of the inclusion of dramatic play, and educational philosophies.

Data were analysed inductively, using processes of constant comparison outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990). These processes involved reading and reading the interview transcripts, fieldnotes and documents, highlighting key words and phrases, and cutting and pasting the text in which these were embedded on to cards. The cards were then sorted into categories, and these categories were gradually refined and sorted into clusters of related categories. While some of the categories were informed by the literature (and confirmed by the data), most emerged from the data.

FACTORS INFLUENCING DECISIONS ABOUT DRAMATIC PLAY

A range of factors influenced the participants' decisions concerning whether to implement dramatic play. The impact of, and the interplay between, these factors is described below.

Survival

F and K frequently referred to their beginning teacher experiences as 'survival'. They were particularly conscious of the pressure of external expectations, including the need to meet curriculum outcomes. Both participants recognised the importance of dramatic play to children but surviving their early years of teaching was their priority. They lacked the confidence to trial different routines and experiences, as reflected in K's comment: "..... *there are a lot of other things to worry about ... like computers and technology and things like that that I'm probably focusing on a little bit more* ..." S also referred to her first year as 'survival', but was more confident about implementing play experiences, in part because it was an expectation of the school that she regularly implement dramatic play. A highly experienced teacher, T was confident of her ability to meet external expectations through dramatic play.

Control

Survival was linked to the need for control. F and K had a strong desire to maintain order and control in their classrooms, as F highlighted when she reflected on a past dramatic play experience : " ... *you've got to keep tabs on it, you know, because ... I've found, maybe I just need to set the parameters better or something, but they just get carried away and the noise and everything is out of control*". While S was also 'surviving' her first year of teaching, control did not appear to be an issue for her, even though play sometimes became boisterous. T loved a "really noisy and busy" class because to her, it indicated
the enjoyment and value children were gaining from their learning discoveries.

Commitment to implementing dramatic play

While all participants considered dramatic play important, their commitment to implementing dramatic play varied. F focused on why it did not exist in her classroom. She said "*I do think it is important, but ... there isn't a great deal of opportunity for*

it ...". In contrast, K and S emphasised the importance of dramatic play for the development of language, negotiation skills and empathic awareness. K commented, "*... they learn so much ... leadership, and problem solving... there's a lot of 'Oh, you wore that costume last week and I want to wear it now' ...*". While S explained, "*I think it's also important in terms of literacy and language ... especially in a classroom that's high in ESL .... I'm quite convinced that children learn language off each other much more quickly than they do off the teacher ...*". T was committed to sharing her understanding of the importance of dramatic play with parents. "*If you value play you can also educate parents about its value*", she commented.

Reflection on professional practice

The participants who implemented dramatic play were more reflective about their practice in relation to dramatic play, than those who did not implement dramatic play. Participating in the study, however, seemed to encourage F and K to reflect on their practice. "*Because I was going to be talking to you about it I've been thinking about it a lot and I suppose working out why th it is ...*", F explained. In contrast, S and T had an ongoing commitment to reflecting about how they might overcome problems in facilitating dramatic play. Referring to a new prop that had been introduced to the dramatic play corner, for example, T. commented, "*...in one way it might look visually appealing ... but personally I don't like it because I feel it can inhibit what is actually played ...*". This commitment to ongoing reflection to improving professional practice seemed influential in furthering their use of dramatic play.

Perceptions of 'dramatic play'

Each participant had a different perception of what dramatic play encompassed. F and K perceived viewed dramatic play primarily as taking on character roles and dressing up. Their rather limited perceptions may have been influenced by a lack of modelling of dramatic play by other more experienced colleagues. While S had a somewhat broader view of play, she saw it as something that predominantly occurred in a home corner. In contrast, T's definition extended far beyond the confines of a dramatic play area. She explained, "*I guess [dramatic play is] really interacting in a social way and having an opportunity to use their imagination and even, not only taking on a different role but just even it can be problem solving about something ... that can be dramatic play*". The broader the participants' perception of dramatic play, the more likely they were to incorporate it into their programs.

Time

F and K frequently mentioned time constraints that inhibited the use of dramatic play. Perceived time constraints encompassed: 1) the time of day where dramatic play was possible; 2) time for teacher involvement in dramatic play; and 3) the opportunity for large blocks of time. As F commented, "*I find a lot of pressure during the day ... I kind of can't relax for a minute ... I'm constantly aware, you know, we've got to get this, this, this, and this done today ...*". It appeared that, for them, the flexibility of leaving work

unfinished had not yet developed, and the pressure to meet personal and external expectations was more confronting. Although S and T were aware of time constraints, they were not willing to compromise the time allocated for play experiences. The importance and commitment they attached to dramatic play overshadowed this perceived difficulty.

Space

Both F and K perceived as essential designated space for a dramatic play area. "*I would love to have, like a little restaurant or something set up in here but because of the size [of the room], I just physically cannot do that ...*", F commented, They considered that the lack of a designated dramatic play area contributed to their neglect of dramatic play. S considered herself fortunate in having a double-sized classroom, a larger-than-typical space that enabled her to set up a dramatic play area each day, as well as floor space for construction material."*Well, one of the bonuses is I've got room ... some classrooms are just so small ...*", she explained. T's room was considerably smaller than S or K's. She encouraged the children to use various areas of the room for dramatic play. Once a week, she also combined classes with another Kindergarten teacher, with a larger room, to provide more space for dramatic play.

Collegial support

Participants were more likely to implement dramatic play if they had the support of their colleagues. K, for example, carefully observed and noted the practices of her more experienced colleagues. "*It's good to see what other teachers are doing, like H, who really values play*", she commented. While K was drawn to the practices of teachers with a philosophy similar to her own, she was aware that some of the Kindergarten teachers viewed play from a different perspective. She reported: "*They'll say 'Oh, I don't know what we're going to do so I guess we'll just play' .... I think some colleagues see it ... as a bit of a time filler ...*" Nevertheless, it appeared that their comments enabled her to reflect on and articulate why play was important in her classroom. Her growing confidence in her ability to justify her use of dramatic play may assist K when confronted by parents or other staff members whose views on dramatic play are inconsistent with her own. S frequently spoke to her colleagues about the dramatic play area and how to overcome logistical challenges associated with implementing dramatic play. Likewise, T regularly reviewed emerging play themes with her colleagues, and discussed how they could provide additional materials to extend children's play experiences. On the other hand, F, who used dramatic play least, made no mention of colleagues' support.

Resources

The participants' perceptions of the availability of resources for dramatic play influenced their use of dramatic play. K found the lack of resources particularly discouraging. She explained, " ... *probably the most [important thing] was the lack of resources ... everything that is there is what I brought in ...*". She considered it necessary to have realistic materials, such as a hat stand or a baby's crib, but her collection of resources for

dramatic play was developing slowly. Her priority was building resources for computers and technology. The availability of resources was influential in S's decision to use dramatic play. "*If you don't have equipment it could be very hard ...*", she commented. In contrast, T did not view the presence of resources as necessary for dramatic play. "*People might say that a lack of resources inhibits play but you don't need expensive resources for dramatic play to occur ... like recycled boxes for shops - you can have that in any classroom ...*", she explained. She valued and encouraged props made by children, such as 'shop signs', which were inexpensive and meaningful to the children.

Class composition

The composition of their class was an important consideration for all participants in deciding whether to use dramatic play. F considered that individual children's learning difficulties limited her use of dramatic play. She referred to an autistic child who "*obviously thrives on more structured tasks and when something creative is put in front of them, he clams up ...*". F. was also concerned about the gender composition of her class. She perceived boys to be more physically active than girls in their dramatic play experiences, and more inclined to engage in 'rough and tumble' play, which was problematic for F, given her need for 'control'. K was also concerned, and somewhat discouraged, by the gender differences and stereotypical roles adopted by children in their dramatic play experiences. In contrast, the high proportion of ESL children in S. and T's classes encouraged them to use dramatic play because of its potential to assist language development. In addition, T implemented strategies to encouraged non-gender specific play themes. It seemed that her strong belief in the benefits of dramatic play had encouraged her to develop strategies to overcome problems that had daunted F and K.

The Principal's expectations

Their Principals' expectations were influential in the participants' decisions about whether to use dramatic play. Although F felt that there was a growing understanding and commitment to early childhood education in the school, she still appeared uncertain as to how play practices may be perceived. "*They [school executive] do accept and encourage it to a degree, ... but ...*", she commented doubtfully. K, S and T were much more convinced of, and encouraged by, their Principals' support for dramatic play experiences for Kindergarten children, which their use of dramatic play. " *... our Principal is very pro-developmental play ... and my supervisor ... so you can go forward knowing that they're not going to come in and say 'Why are you just playing?' ... they recognise the importance of it ...*", S commented. As a beginning teacher, the support of her Principal seemed particularly important.

Curriculum requirements

All participants were conscious of curriculum requirements. F and K saw these as a constraint, although K appeared to have a more flexible approach than F. She noted,

> *... the curriculum - that's huge - there's so much to get through and I'm not a person who thinks 'Well, I'm*
> *going to do this over play' ... no, I just ignore that really because you could go on for ever and ever and*
> *ever and the kids just don't need that, they need to play and get those experiences where they are just*
> *interacting with their friends ...*

Significantly, F and K saw dramatic play as an addition to the curriculum rather than as an integrated component. In contrast, S and T saw dramatic play as a way of meeting curriculum expectations and so were committed to regularly scheduling dramatic play into their timetable.

Parental expectations

F's acute awareness of parental expectations was instrumental in her decision not to use dramatic play was parental expectations. "*These parents ... have huge expectations ...*", she commented. She perceived that parents wanted something to view on paper at the end of each day. While F considered that a 'process over product' approach was more appropriate, she found the pressure from parents difficult to withstand. In contrast, K, S and T did not see parental expectations as particularly influential in their contexts. S and T thought that explaining the importance of play to parents helped them to accept and understand its use in the classroom. "*I think most parents realise that it's important at the age of 5 to be playing ... and in our orientation when they [parents] come in for a day a week for 4 weeks, I mean it's set up like a pre-school with home corner and everything else ...*", S commented.

Although the way in which these factors have been presented here might suggest that they were discrete factors, in reality, there was considerable interplay between them. For F, for example, the combination of her emphasis on "survival", her perceptions that the Principal and parents would not be particularly supportive of play, seemed to magnify the logistical difficulties of a small classroom space and the need to meet curriculum requirements. T's classroom was almost as small, and she was obligated to meet the same curriculum requirements. For T, however, the combined impact of other factors described above, enabled her to use dramatic play more extensively. The next section of the paper describes how S and T, the two participants who made considerable use of dramatic play, incorporated it into their programs.

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IMPLEMENTING DRAMATIC PLAY IN K-2 CLASSROOMS

The key strategies used by S and T are outlined briefly below. Describing their practices may assist other teachers who recognise the importance of dramatic of dramatic play, and who would like to make it a greater focus of their programs.

Familiarising children with opportunities for dramatic play in the classroom

S and T familiarised children with the opportunities available for dramatic play in two ways. First, they spent time allowing children to become familiar with the dramatic play area at the start of the year. S included dramatic play as part of a four week orientation program where children and parents could spend time together exploring their classroom environment, including the dramatic play area. T included dramatic play as part of a staggered entry program in the first week of school. Second, they ensured that the dramatic play area was set up in their classroom for children to revisit. By making it a permanent fixture of the classroom environment, S and T felt that children were less likely to get overexcited because there was an understanding that it could be accessed at any point.

Timetabling substantial blocks for dramatic play

Both S and T timetabled substantial blocks of time in which children were able to engage in dramatic play. S timetabled opportunities for dramatic play twice a week for a period of an hour and a half, while T placed play at the centre of her curriculum. She scheduled daily opportunities for play, generally for a period of an hour and three quarters in both the morning and afternoon. During these periods she integrated other curricula experiences, such as literacy and maths.

Monitoring and observing, and extending children's ideas

Both teachers monitored what was happening in children's dramatic play. S made a point of standing near the dramatic play area so that she could monitor the number of children in the area and decide what materials need to be added to or subtracted from the area. T observed and listened to emerging play themes, and used observational jottings as a basis for extending dramatic play experiences, determining which children needed further assistance understanding a concept, and following up on children's ideas through ongoing group projects. One project devised by the children, and extended by T over several days, involved children transforming the doll's house into a 'snail hotel', and through group negotiation and collaboration, creating snail figurines and hotel rooms from paper. T explained *"... the children even brought in real snails to try out the rooms in the new hotel*!" Children explored the notion of transformation, and were involved in assigning roles, and making props - all important aspects of dramatic play development.

Promoting collaborative learning

Before commencing a dramatic play experience, S and T brought the children together a large group discussion. S had recently set the dramatic play area up as a restaurant. To find out what the children actually knew, she instigated an initial whole group brainstorming session. S then encouraged children to form small groups and to continue brainstorming using a concept map. She considered that this process enabled children to consolidate their thinking and the opportunity to verbalise ideas that may not have been shared with the larger group. S also used books in conjunction with concept maps as a way of visually stimulating the children's ideas. T often used this introductory time to model for the children how to commence a piece of writing about what they may do in the dramatic play area. For example *'Today I am going to buy ....'* was written on a mini-whiteboard and left near the writing table where children could sit and write about their experiences in the dramatic play area. During these introductory times, S and T encouraged children to make decisions about whether they wanted to participate in dramatic play, and if so, what role they would like to play. Both encouraged children to take ownership of their decisions.

Scaffolding dramatic play

Both teachers used many strategies to scaffold dramatic play. To assist children's understandings of the different roles that may exist in a restaurant, for example, S created name cards ('customer', 'waiter', 'cook', and 'cashier') for children to wear around their neck. As children observed each other in a particular role, the labels served as a springboard for assisting other children to enact their chosen role. Problem solving, open-ended questioning, encouraging, and role playing were also used to extend children's play. One child, (M), in T's class, had a keen interest in making signs. Faced with the problem of the shop always being 'open', T encouraged her to think how this could be overcome. M promptly went away and returned with several signs : *'shop', 'opne / yes' (open), 'kos / no' (close).* With the pet shop nearby, M was also frustrated that animals kept appearing in her shop without permission. A sign was made: *'No dogs and cats alud* (allowed)'. The following day, an additional sign, *'Big W'*, was added to the shop, distinguishing the type of shop she had created.

Providing materials

S and T used a range of materials and resources in implementing dramatic play experiences. Much of this material they had collected. One of the most important aspects of providing materials for dramatic play experiences, however, was the integration of materials from other areas of the room. For example, to support children's restaurant play, S incorporated materials from other areas of the room including pencils, paper booklets representing order books, and menus she had created herself. Similarly, when the children in T's class became involved in 'shop play', she placed paper and pencils and lists of shopping words in the dramatic play area. She also encouraged children to move the materials from the dramatic play area to other parts of the room, in line with her underlying philosophy that dramatic play could happen anywhere with anything!

Concluding dramatic play experiences

When concluding dramatic play experiences, S and T gave children a five- minute warning before it was time to pack-away. Children knew this time was spent closing their experience, putting materials back in their place, and ensuring the area was tidy. T considered that this packing away time was an essential part of the children's experience because it gave them closure to the session, and enabled them to move from an imaginative to a realistic mode of thinking. T then assembled the children on the floor and invited them to verbalise what they had been doing in dramatic play. If children had represented their dramatic play experiences in the form of pictures or writing, T encouraged these items to be shared with the class as well. Following the sharing of a few children's experiences, an opportunity existed for feedback from class members. For example, as M shared his idea of the 'pet shop', another child indicated her interest in bringing some toy pets from home. T concluded by saying to the group: "*If you can think of ideas that might help M, you could perhaps share those with him ...*". These opportunities enabled children to think about what play themes had emerged and how they could revisit similar experiences in the days ahead.

Communicating with others about dramatic play

Both S and T communicated the use of dramatic play in their classroom to others. A key strategy that S used was a 'Learning expo'. This initiative involved inviting the parents into the classroom for an afternoon, and encouraging children to play with their parents at a play activity of their choice. In the dramatic play area, S had an information sheet available for parents to read which described what dramatic play was, how it enriched children's thinking, social, creative, language, emotional, and physical skills and the various curriculum learning outcomes that dramatic play offered children. S used these sheets as a basis for talking to parents about the dramatic play their children were engaging in, and about its importance to their child's development.

T mainly communicated with parents and other members of the school community about the importance of dramatic play through documentation. Large folders and classroom walls were adorned with photographs and written information as to how different ideas had emerged in children's play experiences. She documented, for example, how children overcame problems when installing a letter box, created by the children for the dramatic play area.. The following excerpt is taken from the documentation: "*The letter box and house also needed a number. Two was decided upon as the children reasoned that Mrs. P's room must be number 1 as it is the first classroom, so our room is number 2.*" She also used audio tapes, videos, and photography to communicate to others what was happening in children's dramatic play, and to enable children to recall, revisit and build on their experiences.

DISCUSSION

The study has highlighted the interplay between the factors that influenced these early childhood teachers' decisions about whether to implement dramatic play in their kindergarten classrooms. All four participants believed in the importance of dramatic play for young children, yet only two teachers, S and T, translated these beliefs into regular classroom practice. Like F and K, they experienced constraints such as time, space, and curriculum pressure identified by Kagan (1990). However, their strong commitment to implementing dramatic play, their perceptions that the constraints they encountered could be overcome, and their perceptions that the context in which they worked supported their use of dramatic play were instrumental in enabling them to overcome these constraints and to implement dramatic play. In other words, their sense of self-efficacy, or their willingness and ability to take initiative and responsibility for the inclusion of dramatic play in their classrooms, appeared to the most important factor contributing to their provision of dramatic play experiences. In this study, self-efficacy also involved a commitment to developing the classroom organisational skills necessary to implement dramatic play. It also involved working to enhance the status of play in the school community by communicating with others about its importance. While the constraints to implementing dramatic play in school contexts might seem considerable, this study has shown that given commitment, sense of self-efficacy and organisational skills, it is possible to implement dramatic play in the early years of school.

The findings suggest, however, that support is needed for teachers who would like to implement dramatic play but who feel overwhelmed by the perceived constraints, or at a loss about how to proceed. The inclusion in curriculum documents of practical examples of how other teachers incorporate dramatic play into their programs would be helpful. Lists of inexpensive materials teachers can use for dramatic play, examples of strategies to facilitate its use in the classroom, and vignettes of teachers who regularly use dramatic play might also be included. There is also a need to provide teachers and Principals with workshops / inservices that focus on promoting and explaining the importance of dramatic play. If teachers and Principals can attend dramatic play workshops together, there may be the opportunity for building a similar perspective on dramatic play. Through sharing ideas of how to include dramatic play in the classroom, teachers might feel more able overcome the constraints and challenges associated with implementing dramatic play experiences in K-2.

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